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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/HARDING

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: FORMER AOUNIST OPTIMISTIC FOR NOVEMBER
ELECTION, BUT NOT IN AOUN'S FAVOR

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Christian leader Michel Aoun, s former son-law, Sami Nader, is optimistic that Lebanon's political impasse can be resolved in November. He is developing an NGO and think tank to help educate Lebanese voters and the press to support presidential elections on time. He believes the opposition, s calls for early parliamentary elections are a ploy, and that Aoun has lost much support and credibility because of his alliance with Hizballah. He noted that while the electoral law drafted by the Commission on Electoral Reform has some problems, it is a good place to start the dialogue. Nader stated that what Lebanon needs most is strong leaders willing to take bold action in establishing the tribunal and willing to call Hizballah's and Syria, s bluffs. End Summary.

PREPARING FOR PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

2. (SBU) Econoff met with Sami Nader, an economist and political consultant once married to Michel Aoun, s daughter Chantal, on April 16 in the suburban Sin el-Fil neighborhood. Nader began by commenting that the shops and restaurants before the summer 2006 war were very busy, but business and tourism have slacked off. For now, he chooses to hold his meetings in Sin el-Fil to help bring revenue into the area. Nonetheless, Nader said he was optimistic for a return to political normality and that the political impasse can be resolved in November. He is developing an NGO and think tank, called Citizen, s Forum, to help educate Lebanese voters on the new electoral law and the upcoming presidential elections. He was coy in naming presidential candidates, and stated tht his group instead was developing a list of 100 qualities of a suitable candidate, including cross-confessional support, independence from patronage politics, and a commitment to democracy. When pressed, he stated that Samir Franjieh, Charles Rizk, Nassib Lahoud, and -- though he personally did not like him -- Riad Salameh would be good candidates. He noted these men have no sectarian base to which they are beholden and can act as independent leaders. He did comment that as the time of the election draws closer, his group would probably back a candidate.

3. (SBU) When asked about the possibility of a two-government scenario if the presidency issue is not

resolved in November, Nader said it was a definite possibility because, &after all Aoun did it before, and did not learn from that experience.⁸ Nonetheless, Nader believed a candidate will be selected. He said that was the goal of his group -- to encourage voters to pressure the government for reform and presidential elections on time.

AOUN PHENOMENON OVER

¶4. (C) Nader -- who held no overt animosity toward Aoun -- stated that Aoun has lost much support and credibility because of his alliance with Hizballah. Nader claimed to have single-handedly authored the Free Patriotic Movement's "Orange Book," which outlined the group's policy agenda in advance of the 2005 elections. But, he stated, Aoun has no policy goals now except attaining the presidency. He did not believe that Aoun had a shot at replacing President Lahoud, and given Aoun's age of 73 this is his last opportunity to become president. Nader repeatedly asserted that Lebanese Forces Leader Samir Geagea consistently polled as high -- and sometimes higher -- than Aoun. Econoff noted that Geagea probably would have problems securing the presidency given his civil war crimes. Nader agreed but noted Geagea is playing an important role in publicly criticizing opposition efforts to topple the government, highlighting the importance of the Christian community in Lebanon, and supporting the ruling March 14 Coalition.

¶5. (SBU) Nader then went into a long discussion of how the Christian community's strength lies in its diversity of leadership. "It's not (just) either Aoun or Geagea," he remarked, but that there have always been several Christian leaders to follow, such as Dory Chamoun, Amine Gemayel, et al. This allows for public debate and true representation of

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the community.

ELECTORAL LAW AND SECTARIAN POLITICS

¶6. (SBU) Nader believes the electoral law drafted by the Commission on Electoral Reform has some problems, but is nevertheless a good place to start the much-needed dialogue. He believes the mixed proportional and majority voting is probably the best system to get everyone on board. He personally would have preferred a totally proportional system because, as the draft law stands now, the "qada (district) is too small and the muhafaza (governorate) is too big to get true representation."

¶7. (SBU) Nader believes Lebanon does not necessarily need to change the confessional system -- Lebanese identity is too closely intertwined with religion to ever totally get rid of it. What needs to be done is to start developing and inculcating the idea of "common spaces," where sectarian bias is less important and not the only basis for political support. He cited, for example, how the Lebanese economy and banking sector keeps functioning despite the turmoil because it is considered a common space, necessary for all. Politics and involvement in the electoral process need to evolve the same way.

¶8. (SBU) Nader believes the opposition's calls for early elections are a ploy. He says the opposition recognizes a new law would have to be approved and would take time to negotiate. He said Hizballah is not concerned about a new electoral law because the group believes it will do well under any system.

BOLD GOVERNMENT ACTION NECESSARY

¶9. (SBU) Nader stated that what Lebanon needs most are strong leaders willing to take bold actions; he praised

President Bush,s tough positions against Syria and Iran. He said Prime Minister Siniora should request the tribunal, because that is the most important issue in Lebanon. Like many Lebanese, Nader believes a tribunal will help prevent future attacks in Lebanon and weaken Syria. Nader said he was a close friend of the assassinated an-Nahar editor and parliamentarian Gibran Tuani. He believes that justice for the Hariri, Tuani, and other killings is necessary to move on.

He said the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri has come to symbolize more than just the death of Hariri, because Hariri was a respected Sunni leader throughout the region. Finding justice for his murder will help to resolve some of Lebanon,s and the region's issues. He stated that Hizballah and Syria are playing the waiting game, hoping to hold out until French President Chirac leaves office and there is a change in the U.S. administration.

¶10. (C) Nader recommended that the Siniora Government try to corner Hizballah by publicly calling Hizballah,s bluff. He said the Government should tell Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah "enough is enough -- we recognize your desire to help your community but the cost to Lebanon is too high and we will no longer play your game." He said the government should give Hizballah the ultimatum that if they want to keep their state within a state they can "have it, and they can take the south." But they then cannot be part of the government because they will need to develop their own government for their own state. He said this will force Lebanese Shia to choose between Hizballah or Lebanon. When queried if he thought this might scare Hizballah or the Shia community into rash and potentially violent action, Nader said that Hizballah will not and cannot use its arsenal against the population or the group risks losing its support.

¶11. (C) Nader also believed the GOL should take Syrian President Asad up on his offer for tripartite talks among Syria, Lebanon, and Israel. Nader noted Asad and Israel were discussing border demarcation and need to include Lebanon because all three have similar border issues. He said a tough U.S. negotiator should also be included in these talks. Nader believed this also will help corner Hizballah.

ACTIVIST PLANS

¶12. (SBU) Nader never admitted to being a March 14 supporter but stated that Prime Minister Siniora had won the support of

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all Lebanese communities. He noted that the numerous Lebanese flags that were displayed, vice sectarian flags of the past, are there in support of Siniora. He also called Sunni leader and head of the largest bloc in parliament Sa,ad Hariri a &good guy8 and gave Hariri a lot of credit for being willing to make a decision and tough choices. He contrasted Sa,ad Hariri to his father, Rafiq Hariri, who was more of a consensus politician.

¶13. (SBU) Nader, who has a degree from the University of Chicago and studied political science in Paris, believes he will easily get funding for his NGO/think tank and can help Lebanon create common spaces and move toward presidential elections. While at times frustrated with all Lebanese politicians because they refuse to take decisive action, he stated he is committed to remaining in Lebanon -- unlike many of his Western educated colleagues -- because he feels a sense of duty.

FELTMAN